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ABSTRACT

The beneficial aspects of introducing objectives for foreign language teaching based on functional or communicative principles are discussed. Functional objectives make the learner the center of interest and aid in the process of deciding what to include in a syllabus. Functional objectives offer more guidelines for the teacher in the classroom and help teachers and learners to see the relationship between what is being done in the classroom and what is expected of the learner at the end of the course. Functional objectives also demand a greater interest in "communicative" tests. The problem of consistently building up a functional syllabus for beginners is addressed, and it is argued that it is possible to grade material in a functional syllabus by the choice of authentic material and by concentrating on some of the lexis and some of the structures. Caution is advised against focusing on the lists of structures and lexical items instead of considering the philosophy behind the approach. In addition, there is a danger of oversimplifying what one considers the needs and interests of learners. (SW)

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Talk by Drs. W.P.B.M. Welsing held at the I.A.T.E.F.L.-conference on Friday 14th April 1978.

[The Dashing Clockmaker, Or: How Not To Be Afraid of the Swinging Pendulum.]

Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a rather difficult task to speak at the end of a conference when so many experts have treated the subject at hand so extensively. One cannot even hope - when preparing one's talk - to be able to add ons single new element.
Still I must say that I am grateful for Dr. Lee's invitation to make a contribution. This has the form of a cliché used to describe an honest feeling. My talk will be of a rather general nature rather than deal with a very specific topic.
I am happy to be able to testify that the latest developments in the field of F.L.T. have added so much to our profession, have inspired so many and are resulting in a production and use of a kind of teaching material that will make learning a new language not only a more pleasurable, but also a more rewarding exercise than it used to be.
By saying this I have made my position clear: I have jumped on to the band-waggon named "The functional approach".
But aren't we all band-waggoners one way or another? Isn't "j-t-b-w" "Join-The-Band-Waggon" one of the favourite games people always play?
Marching along with it does not always mean that one is happy with all the decisions that are taken underway.
Even when one keeps muttering at the various drivers or the happy few that are comfortably seated on top of it, one may agree with the direction taken.
It may be compared with the behaviour of a friend of mine the other day when our two families were returning home from a caravanning holiday in France.
He was leading but had lost his way when driving through Liège, a town in Belgium that might do with a few more signposts for Dutchmen wanting to go home. I took over and was able to get us both out of Liège and on to the direct motorway leading to Maastricht, I must admit, not via the most direct route.
My friend had shown he had approved of the direction taken by following me, but he betrayed his emotions of admiration and gratitude by saying: "You know, where you went wrong was at the second set of traffic lights . . .".
A good friend indeed.

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So, in spite of all the misunderstandings about details of the route and the dangers that are lurking aloung the road - and I shall deal with one or two later - the introduction of objectives for foreign language teaching based on functional or communicative principles, as was done for the first time for the Threshold Level, will be beneficial in various respects.

1. Once one has decided to draw up functional objectives, it will be impossible not to make the learner the centre of interest. Even at this very moment when we realize that for many many years teachers have agreed on being "learner/pupil centred" with the help of all sorts of teaching skills, we still must admit that c.g. in our country the majority of children that are taught a foreign language, are given watered-down versions of what is ultimately seen as desirable for a few very lucky ones, who are expected to need the foreign language in higher vocational or a university training. And even for these it is true to say that their actual needs are hardly ever considered.

2. Once we have agreed on making the needs and interests of the learners our starting point for objectives and our syllabus it will be easier to deal with dilemmas about what to include and what not c.g..
   in his excellent lecture yesterday Tony Cowie did a very courageous thing by pleading for more detailed study on the acquisition of vocabulary in another way than by the presentation of lexis in a context. His arguments were lucid and convincing. The scientific approach baffled - I think - many methodologists and certainly people like me who so very often work on intuïtive lines. The contents of what was said were not questioned, but during the discussion the question was raised: how much of this should be incorporated in our teaching (and at what stage) ?
   Questions like these can - at least to my mind - never be answered but in a very general way; the answer will vary from one set of learners to another, or may even be different for individual learners within a group: it may very well depend on the "learning-style" of every individual learner.

3. A third point. The functional approach is so humane. All who wish can learn a foreign language for their own purposes. As Prof. Piepho stated "It is not a matter of "some can" and "others can't", it is a matter of time". And I think he will agree when I say it is also a matter of "what" and "for what purpose".

4. We all know that "official guidelines" have an enormous effect on the tests administered to learners at all stages. And these tests again have their influence on the classroom procedures. So, consequently, the introduction of functional objectives may encourage the use of communicative language learning, although - as many have outlined among whom Dr. Lee in his talk - the really experienced teacher has always tried to teach his/her students to communicate in the target language.
I am aware of the fact that I speak about the situation in countries like Holland. Conditions will be different in other countries, or better: students' needs will be different all over the world. But from our own experiences in the retraining of teachers of English I can say that the effect of a methodology based on functional objectives and firmly rooted in communicative principles has had an enormous stimulating effect on both learners and teachers.
Using the Threshold-Level by Dr. Jan van Ek as a working model, my colleagu Cor van Bommel and myself were able to work out suggestions for functional objectives for T.E.F.L. in lower vocational schools and this afternoon Cor van Bommel explanied how these objectives may be realized at different levels working with students in heterogeneous groups.
In discussing these objectives with many groups of teachers who worked in these schools, we found that so many had never actually thought of the reasons why these pupils should learn a foreign language. It was simply a matter of tradition or "status". The exam of the end of the pupils' school careers fully determined their work in the classroom, and these exams were and still are hardly communicative. You all know the situation, and I certainly do not blame these teachers, who were all very anxious to make a good job of their teaching. They were not really trained and backed up in any way to look at their work in this way; they carried on with what had been done before them as well as they could.
But, functional objectives, narrowly specifying what a learner should be able to do with the language in particular situations give much more specific guidelines to the teachers as how to help their students realize these objectives. They enable them to use motivating teaching procedures without having to think that these are "little extra's".
From activity to activity, from lesson to lesson, from week to week teacher and learners can see the relationship between what is being done in the

classroom and what is expected of the learner at the end of the course.

5. Of course the realization of communicative objectives should also be assessed by means of tests that measure communicative performance. It is to be hoped, that more and more tests will be developed - for all skills - that are more just to teachers and learners than some of the tests used now.
I think that it is this philosophy behind the functional approach that gives it its great force.

I said before I would try and point out a few dangers.
When listening to people in my own country, who are less enthusiastic or rather sceptical about the functional objectives, I feel, that they do not so much focus on the main philosophy behind it, but that they have looked more closely at the lists of structures and lexis, especially of the Threshold level publication, than at the reasoning behind the selection.
They keep considering these lists as prescriptive, rather than regarding them as sources of information, as suggestions that - if felt necessary for particular reasons - may be added to or simply disregarded.
Personally I feel that - certainly for teachers - a collection of sample texts, a kind of text-typology would be more helpful.
Now, what may happen if one concentrates on these lists of structures and lexis containing language-elements thought necessary for the realisations of the various language functions at a particular level. Here's one instance.

At a conference of applied linguists one speaker wanted to demonstrate the inadequacy of Van Ek's list and chose the following procedure:

"Imagine a person at T.level (T) and a native speaker (N) discuss the hobby "football". The T-level person opens the conversation by stating "I like football". The lecturer imagined the native speaker would take this as an indication that the rest of the conversation would also be on football and the following dialogue might result from T's openings entence "I like football":

a. T. I like football N. (no comment)
T. It's a very exciting game.

or

T. I like football
N. I don't: there's too much violence in the game nowadays.

The lecturer now checked these utterances off against the lists of structures and lexis in the T.Level and found that "exciting", "violence" and "nowadays" were missing.
His conclusion was that this attempt to discuss football would be killed off at the very beginning or would lead to attempt on both sides to make clear the meaning of "exciting", "violence" and "nowadays".
This is almost a charicature. The lecturer could not have chosen a better example to demonstrate his inability to understand what the functional approach is about. He underestimates what his imaginary T.level person would be able to convey even without the command of words like "exciting, nowadays and violence". He does not understand that our "Thresholder" by starting a conversation with a native speaker by saying "I like football" does much more than indicate a desire to discuss his favourite hobby. A decent native speaker would immediately notice that this person was a foreigner, trying to communicate. He would almost certainly not react by making statements like "there's too much violence in the game nowadays".
I shall not try and speculate on what actually might be going on between these two, but what our lecturer should have done was: take a casetterecorder arrange a more or less spontaneous discussion between native speakers and T.level persons and try and analyse what actually happened. On the basis of his findings he might then suggest an adaptation of the T.level list.

Abuse of "the lists" is not only made by attackers, but also by followers, overzealous followers, I should say, people who think they have found the formula for easy success, alchemists, who - if they have their way - will use these ingredients, mix them up with a number of situations, add an introduction reflecting the fashionable thinking of the time and dish the whole up in a glossy cover. In this way they will discredit the philosophy by substituting a truly functional syllabus by a set of phrase-books and may be as harmful to this new development as some have been to the structural approach.

Another danger is the over simplification of what one considers the "needs and interests" of learners.
To keep a learner making statements about himself or asking questions about the immediate environment may be very incommunicative, in spite of good intentions. Forcing students to use structures such as "I agree, I disagree, I love, I hate", does not mean that the students express intellectual or emotional attitudes. Building up a functional syllabus is much more complex.

Life is not going to be easy for the band-waggoners. The production of interesting, really communicative exercises is a challenging but difficult task. The first few coursebooks on the market clearly show that we are in a period of transition. The production of material is not too difficult for learners at an intermediate or advanced level, where ample use may be made of authentic material and where the student has already acquired an ability to communicate in the target language.
But, however much we should wish it, I am not sure whether it will be feasible to build up a functional syllabus consistently, right from the beginning. I am talking here about a general course, not about English for special purposes.

In his paper delivered at the BAAL annual General Meeting in September 1977, Keith Johnson gave a number of reasons for designing a beginner's course structurally and at the same time incorporating many valuable features associated with the communicative approach.

As I said before, I believe in the desirability to teach functionally from the very beginning; learning a language is learning a strategy of communication through language. It is not just stocking away bits of structural or lexical information in the mind.
This is as much true for beginners as for more advanced students.
Therefore my enthusiasm is not tempered by Mr. Johnson's lucid reasoning.
His main objection to a functional syllabus for beginners is the fact that " a functional organisation automatically implies structural disorganisation" and "in the classroom the language system must be presented in a graded progression,so that the learner may perceive and practise structural regularities one by one" Agreed!
Mr. Johnson then invites people who will not accept his conclusion that the functional syllabus should not be used at this level, to show that "either the functional syllabus does not imply structural disorganisation, or that structural disorganisation need not be a disadvantage" I agree that proving either of these challenges at this moment is beyond me.
But certainly, if a structural syllabus may be adapted, as Mr. Johnson suggest later on, we could also adjust the functional syllabus in such a way that we can present the language system in a graded progression. I underline the word system.

If I show beginners anauthentic advertisement like the one I have taken from an everyday English newspaper. (See page 7),

I certainly show them a "structural disorganisation" in the sense that the authentic language is not graded, at least not for the foreign beginner, (- the simplicity of some advertisements sometimes seems to point to the fact that they have been graded to be understood by people whose intelligence is even below average -).
But we may focus with our learners on one special phenomenon in the message of the advertisement: in other words I do not grade the material, I grade my expectation of what the learner may do with it. Perhaps he can do more than I can imagine!

So here are two ways to grade functional material

1. The choice of an advertisement (simple language-repetition).
2. The possibility to concentrate on some of the lexis and some of the structures.

If necessary, the teacher may even use the mother tongue, avoiding tranlation however!
I would certainly not try and exploit all the possibilities of this text, although there are quite a few.
This form of "grading" can take place at all levels. One may use the same material and expect different responses from the learners.
In this way, it may be possible to collect enough suitable authentic material and at the same time build up the language system consistently. Why not fully use all the advantagesof the "structurally graded progression", making sure that in each step we "hide" a new structure on which we focus.
We may very well end up by using as many adventages and avoiding as many disadvantages from both systems, so that it does not really matte from which we set out.
Let's not be afraid of "fashions",of the swinging of the pendulum. When the pendulum stops swinging, the clock will stop running, so the clock-maker is not afraid of giving it a bold swing. We have had them all: the gramm-translation swing, the direct approach swing, the aural-oral swing, the structural swing an now the functional-notional swing.
They all have contributed to our understanding of what languages are and how the can be acquired. Thank God for the dashing clockmaker.

And perhaps I may now use this opportunity of being the last speaker,to thank God for people like Dr. Bill Lee, who year after year manages to get so many clockmakers gathered here to discuss their problems, tell about their expererencies and exchange views. I hope that for many more yearsto come we may enjoy his inspiring energy.